

ON EARTH AS IT IS IN HEAVEN

Penny Milam

It was almost 9 a.m. on a September Thursday. The day was already warm, and the morning sun shone through the lace curtains, past the faded wallpaper of fruits and vegetables, over the cheap but painfully clean countertops of the Birchfield kitchen. Beneath the sunlight and early heat, Vesta Birchfield detected the promise of fall in the air. Even if Tennessee was a fickle lady when it came to weather, Vesta always knew the difference between a false start and the real deal. Lonnie had called her a witch when she started sniffing the air and predicting frost, but he was joking—he knew she didn't truck with that nonsense. She'd just always loved fall, and she watched for it like a blind date—hopeful and excited, anxious that it wouldn't come on time. She'd have to get Lonnie to get her fall sweaters out of the attic this weekend.

Her freckled, blue-veined hand froze as she reached for the coffeepot. Vesta hadn't made that mistake in a while, and the now-familiar cold bath of

loss stopped her in her tracks. She seldom forgot Lonnie was gone, the lack of him louder than a ticking clock in a silent room. But sometimes she forgot herself, calling into the empty house for his attention, or asking him to turn the thermostat down, or listening unconsciously for his heavy foot on the porch. Vesta, dressed in her going-out clothes, shook off the embarrassment and icy tide of new grief, and instead poured a generous cup of coffee from the steaming pot. It wasn't one of those fancy machines that used the expensive pods, but she had splurged an extra five dollars at Walmart on a coffee maker with a timer. Just add the filter, grounds, and water, set the timer, and in the morning, she had a pot of hot Folger's waiting for her. It was the little things, she mused as she sipped from her favorite cup—an enormous mug her daughter Becky had bought her last month, knowing Vesta loved the Bible verse written in pretty cursive across the front: “Be still and know...”

Of course, Vesta loved the *full* Bible verse. To be honest, she took small offense at the mug not finishing the quote—be still and know what? But she liked how colorful it was, and the rim curved perfectly against her lip. And she appreciated her daughter thinking of her, so she used the mug every morning, choosing to mostly ignore the slightly blasphemous quote in favor of the sheer amount of coffee the ceramic cup could hold.

Vesta didn't sit down at the kitchen table, preferring to lean against the counter. She had to leave as soon as she finished her coffee, so best not to get too comfortable. She refused to admit that she might avoid the table because it made her sharply aware of who wasn't sitting with her, his hand holding his own coffee cup—always wrapped around the center with his thumb threaded through the handle—his eyes focused on the paper, but his foot jiggling an impatient tattoo under the table. Forever in a hurry, and yet always at ease.

Besides, she was already dressed in her slacks and purple tunic and she didn't want them to wrinkle. She liked to look presentable at church, even if it wasn't Sunday. God deserved your best, clothes and attitude alike, and wearing less than your best—even for volunteer work—seemed a sin. Vesta hugged her mug with both hands, her eyes carefully evading Lonnie's empty chair.

The sharp rainfall of nails against the laundry room linoleum caused her to bite back a sigh. Not all of Becky's thoughtful gestures were equally appreciated, and she sat her mug down with a deliberate click of long-suffering. A brown and white terrier trotted into view, jaunty and cheerful with his tongue lolling. At the sight of him, Vesta's pleasure cooled like her coffee. She didn't hate the dog; she didn't hate *any* of God's creatures. It's just

that she didn't particularly care for animals. She'd never allowed pets, though Lonnie thought it might be nice, and Becky had begged.

The dog didn't mind her indifference, though. He pranced to her and sat obediently at her feet. Of course he did. Vesta saw to it that he was taken care of impeccably—obedience training, vet visits, daily walks. Never let it be said she didn't take care of him. She just didn't like him very much.

She scooped dry dog food into his bowl from a bag under the sink. "Here, Sam," she told him, and he cheerily ate. His metal dog tag clacked against the bowl, displaying the name 'Samson' in bold letters.

The dog was another gift from Becky, meant to help Vesta get over the death of her husband. As if a ratty little dog could help her recover from the loss of a forty-three-year marriage. Lonnie had died only nine months ago, after an ugly, short-lived bout with colon cancer, and Becky had surprised her mother with the dog only a few months later. Vesta knew she'd brought it because she felt guilty. Becky didn't visit her mother as often as she should, especially considering she only lived ten minutes away, and the dog was atonement. She'd delivered it one evening with a crate, a bag of food and treats, and a tote full of toys and ridiculous sweaters. Vesta eyed the dog suspiciously, but he'd been oblivious to her hesitation. He lay near her feet, politely

reserved. She'd moved her shoes away from him. She didn't want dog hair on her trousers.

"I named him for you already, Mom," Becky said, oblivious to the widow's displeasure. "I call him Samson! Because he's got long-hair, and because he's not very big or strong. It's a joke, see?"

A dog forced on Vesta was bad enough, but she wasn't even allowed to name it. And the idea of calling the pint-sized creature Samson was ludicrous, even more so picturing herself calling him the Biblical name in front of other people. She took to calling him Sam, a much more respectable name. When her daughter came over, Becky crooned his full name and showered the dog with caresses and treats. Vesta wondered why Becky, a single forty-something who lived alone, hadn't kept the dog for herself.

"Where's his toys, Mom? I bought him lots of stuff to play with."

"He don't need any toys, Becky. He's a *dog*."

Becky was disappointed that her mother hadn't gotten into the spirit of spoiling the new pet. But she really should have known better, Vesta thought. Vesta hadn't been a permissive parent to Becky, whom she loved; why would she be any more so with an animal?

Vesta watched Sam eat his breakfast, vaguely impressed at how neatly he chewed. Big dogs made big messes; at least this one was somewhat tidy. No accidents on the rugs, he didn't shed too terribly as long as she brushed him, and he rarely barked. He was a quiet, well-behaved, unwanted chore. She drank her coffee as she waited both for him to finish and for the phone to ring. It was almost nine, and Becky called at nine on the dot every Thursday. Vesta didn't think Becky was aware of the routine; she probably thought she called spontaneously every week.

Right on cue, the kitchen phone jangled, and Vesta scooped the cordless handset off its cradle. "Hello?"

"Good morning, Mom! It's Becky!" The chirping voice held a note of indulgence, as if Vesta would be surprised to hear her own daughter.

"Mornin', hon. How are you?"

"*I'm* good, Mom. How are *you*?" Both women talked in italics, strong emphasis on certain words to hammer home a point. Though Becky had learned the habit from her mother, it annoyed Vesta to be on the receiving end.

"*I'm* just fine, Becky." She gave it back to her daughter. "I was just getting ready to walk to the church. I'm working the Charity Closet today."

"I hope you have some *help*." They had this conversation every week.

"Sure. Sister Tawny is supposed to meet me there. Not that we're ever very busy. I could do it by myself."

Becky acted as if Vesta had agreed to walk down a dark alley alone at night. "Mom, I wouldn't want you to work all by *yourself* at the church. You're too—" She cut herself off, but Vesta wryly finished the sentence.

"Too old? I think I'll be all right."

"If you're sure.... Just be careful and take it easy. I wouldn't want you to get hurt over there all alone."

"I'm not alone, remember? Sister Tawny'll be there. And if it bothers you, you know you can always come volunteer with me. Lord knows the church would love to have your help."

"No, no, I've got to work this afternoon, Mom. I was just calling to check on you and Samson. How's the master of the house?" Her tone was teasing, but Vesta didn't care for it. The master of her house had never been and never would be a dog.

"The *dog* is just fine. How's work going?"

Becky was breezy but dismissive. "It's just fine, Mom. The hospital's always busy, but I like it." Becky was a registered nurse with a new job at the

hospital. She'd done home healthcare for many years, but the sad, confusing time after her father's quick death had led Becky to make some big changes in her life. Vesta worried for her daughter, but she seemed to be surviving. She'd even developed some friendships—at least, she occasionally mentioned a few names in conversations with her mother. Vesta prayed to Jesus that Becky would find a nice man soon. In Vesta's generation, forty would have been a nail in the coffin, but people nowadays did things so much later. There was still a chance for Becky to get married, give her mother some grandchildren.

They spoke for only a few more minutes before Becky made an excuse to hang up. Just as her calls were predictable, so was their length. She hung up with a promise to think about coming to church on Sunday, but Vesta wouldn't hold her breath. Becky was a good girl, but she had yet to commit to a church home, no matter how many times her mother invited her.

Vesta took Sam's leash from the hook in the laundry room and snapped it to his collar. He wriggled excitedly and raced to the door. "Give me a second," she grumbled, holding tight to his tether as she fished in her purse. She needed to make sure she had her keys before locking the door. Lonnie always kept a spare key in the flowerpot on the back porch, but she took it out when he'd died. She didn't like to think about people having the means to get into her

house so easily. If they were going to rob her, they were going to have to put in more effort than *that*.

Before she found the keys, the phone rang again. Surprised, she halted her search to stare at it; even Sam cocked an interested ear—they seldom got calls other than Becky’s. When it rang again, Vesta grabbed it with a suspicious greeting.

“Sister Vesta?” came the hesitant voice.

Sister Tawny’s breathy, apologetic tone always irritated Vesta, especially now when she could only be calling for one reason. “Good morning, Sister Tawny. I was just on my way out the door to meet you at the church.”

There was an embarrassed pause, and then the soft voice blurted out, “I was calling because Lauren finally had her baby last night.”

Vesta stiffened but offered politely, “Well, that’s wonderful. I knew she was due any day now.”

She could hear Tawny’s smile. “Overdue, actually. We wondered if the baby wouldn’t never come. Lauren was nine days past due and we were...”

“A boy?”

“Yes! Gavin Abraham, 8 pounds, 7 ounces. And loud! Lordamercy, you could hear him wailing all the way down the hall! Robert and I were there, of

course. We haven't missed a grandchild's birth yet..." She trailed off as she heard her own words, mentioning not only her living husband but also her plethora of grandchildren. Vesta took it in stride.

"He's your fifth, isn't he? Seems like you've got quite a crew."

"Yes..."

"Now all your kids have kids, don't they? James and Lauren and Amanda."

Vesta paused. "I can't seem to remember. Is Amanda married yet?"

A brief silence and then Tawny stiffly replied, "No."

Vesta feigned sympathy. "That sure must wear her out, chasing after those two little ones all by herself." Vesta may have no grandkids of her own just yet, but she didn't have any *illegitimate* ones either, a fact she didn't mind reminding Tawny of.

"She manages pretty well."

"I'm sure she does," Vesta assured her. "So, I'd love to make a dish for Lauren and her family. I know how exhausting it can be to have a new little one. If I bring you a casserole on Sunday, will you make sure they get it?"

"Of course. I know they'll appreciate it."

Vesta held the phone, waiting for Tawny to work up the nerve to explain the real reason for her call. Finally, the fluttery words broke over the line,

“Well, I was calling, Sister Vesta, because with the baby being born last night...well, I should really head over to Lauren’s and help out some. You’re absolutely right. She’s overwhelmed with everything... and I hate to leave it all on her shoulders...”

“Isn’t her husband with her?”

“Oh, yes, but you and I both know how useless men are with new babies! This is their third, and Jonathon held him last night like he didn’t know which end was up.” She giggled, but when Vesta didn’t respond, she hurried on. “Anyways, I’d really like to be there with them, so I don’t think there’s any way I can help with the Charity Closet today.” Neither lady spoke for a beat. Vesta was thinking that Tawny wasn’t much of a help wherever she was—too flighty and forgetful—and that she might be getting the better end of the deal than her poor daughter.

Tawny took her silence for disapproval. “I know it’s terrible of me to leave you in the lurch like this, but babies come when they come, with no consideration for our plans... Would you like me to call Sister Sophie and see if she’ll fill in for me?”

Good Lord, she was worse than Tawny. “No, that’s all right. You go spend some time with your new grandbaby. I can manage the Closet just fine without you today.”

“Well, if you’re sure...” Tawny replied happily. “I’ll be sure to bring pictures of him to church on Sunday. He’s awful cute, and so fat! He’s already got a headful of hair and—”

“I’ll bring that casserole on Sunday, too.”

“Oh... Yes, thanks so much.”

After hanging up the phone, Vesta went back to searching for her keys. Finding them, she took Sam’s leash, grabbed her packed lunch off the counter, and left the kitchen, being sure to lock the door securely behind her.

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Vesta tied Sam to the signpost directing passersby to the Charity Closet housed in the Fellowship Hall and then unlocked the door that led straight into the Closet from outside, propping it open. She flipped on the lights of the small room and tutted as she saw the state the last volunteers had left it in. Clothing hung recklessly off the racks lining each wall of the room, and a table stood in the middle, crowded with more clothes, bunched up and carelessly tossed. Church members donated their old clothes and shoes to the Closet, and

they were encouraged to drop them on the table to be sorted by the volunteers, washed if necessary, and hung up for easy access to anyone who wanted them. There was no charge for the clothing; the volunteers were just supposed to open the doors, be welcoming to anyone who showed up, and organize and tidy the donations. Vesta liked the idea of being Jesus's feet and hands, helping the poor and the needy, but she felt there should be something else given besides just the clothes. Weren't they supposed to be saving *souls*, too? How would these poor and needy people learn about the Lord if all the volunteers did was give them clothes? Pastor Raymond stressed to the volunteers that they shouldn't make the guests feel uncomfortable, but Vesta figured a little discomfort was okay—that's how the Holy Spirit worked sometimes. Against the rules, Vesta read the Lord's Prayer to the customers before she gave them their clothing. Lord knew, none of the people who came to the Closet ever came to the church services—where else would they get the Word except if she read it to them?

During the morning hours, she only had one customer, a slouching and timid young man. "Good morning," she said crisply, along with the practiced information the volunteers were supposed to give to everyone who entered. "Help yourself to anything you'd be able to use. Everything's been washed,

and we even have a washer and dryer to wash any uniforms or work clothes of yours, if you need it.” She wasn’t supposed to specify ‘work clothes.’ Vesta was happy to wash a uniform, but she wasn’t here to just do somebody’s *laundry*. She was supposed to leave them alone now, unless they wanted to talk. Pastor Raymond was big on building relationships with other people, and Tawny was exceptionally good at keeping a conversation going with strangers, but Vesta had never had the knack, nor the desire. But she did pull out her Bible, looking up the book of Matthew, ready to read the Lord’s Prayer to the young man if he took anything. She had it memorized, of course, but she thought it was important they saw her reading from the Good Book.

But the man only spent a few minutes inside the room, halfheartedly sliding hangers; he seemed ashamed to be there, and she was glad. It showed he didn’t want to take charity; maybe it might even motivate him to get a job. He grunted at her before leaving without taking anything. She heard Sam give a friendly bark, and she edged to the door to see the young man lean down to ruffle Sam’s ears. He smiled at the dog before heading down the sidewalk. Sam barked at Vesta when he caught sight of her, but she ignored him and went back to folding clothes.

The Closet was only open once a week from 10 to 2, and there was no set time for lunch. Some volunteers didn't bother with lunch at all, but Vesta was set in her routine, and her blood sugar tended to drop if she didn't eat at the same time every day. At a little after noon, she reached under the counter for her packed lunch when she heard a car in the lot. Pushing her lunch back out of sight, she stepped toward the open door. Outside, a small red car had parked, its driver side dented, and its front fender cracked. As it idled, Vesta thought no one would get out, but finally the door opened and a small Hispanic woman stepped onto the pavement.

Vesta folded her arms as the woman unstrapped a baby from its car seat in the back. There were a lot of Mexicans in the area. She didn't know how they all ended up in Tennessee—it seemed pretty far from the border—but plenty of local farmers hired them for field work, planting and picking. She had no problem with people earning their pay, and she wasn't so sure about building a wall, but there were ways to enter the country, legal and respectable ways, and Vesta didn't like people breaking rules.

But it wasn't her place to judge, and she pushed aside her own feelings as the woman hoisted her baby, a caramel-skinned, black-haired boy less than a year old, onto her hip. She opened the passenger side door to let out a little

girl, at most four-years-old, with long black hair pulled into a neat ponytail and a red t-shirt and shorts. Her little feet were encased in scuffed sandals, her bare toes sporting red nail polish. Bright earrings adorned her ears, and she wore a charm bracelet on her wrist. Vesta hadn't allowed her Becky to wear makeup or jewelry until middle school.

The trio came up the sidewalk, the baby boy taking in his surroundings with intelligent eyes, his sister's gaze locked on the little dog tied to the signpost. She said something in frantic, excited Spanish, and her mother gave a sharp negative retort. The little girl pouted, and she stared longingly at Sam. He didn't help matters, sitting on his haunches, a friendly grin on his face, his head cocked to the left. Vesta shook her head at his antics but called out to the newcomers, "He don't bite. He's real friendly." The woman paused as they neared the dog, considering her daughter's plea and Vesta's permission. Then she nodded and gave rapid instructions and a threat to the little girl. Vesta couldn't understand Spanish, but she knew good and well a mother's warning to behave when she heard it. The little girl dropped down beside Samson, who rolled over and offered her his belly. Giggling, she happily scratched.

"What is his name?" the mother asked. Her words were comfortably spoken, but a small accent gave her away.

With a sigh, Vesta admitted, “Samson.”

The woman laughed. “Like in the Bible? That’s very funny.”

Vesta moved out of the doorway to let the woman and the baby inside the Closet, leaving the little girl outside. She offered them the practiced welcome. “Help yourself to anything you’d be able to use. Everything’s been washed, and we’ve got a washer and dryer for any uniforms or work clothes, if you need it.”

The woman, with an easy, cheerful smile, nodded. “I know it’s still warm, but I think the weather’s about to get cold. The children need warmer clothing.”

Vesta nodded. “I think you’re right. The only thing you can predict about Tennessee weather is that it’s unpredictable.” She didn’t expect a laugh—it was a tired old joke—but the other woman responded with a pleasant chuckle.

“That is true! Last week was cold, and we needed jackets. Today, Lupita begs me to let her wear her shorts again.” She gestured with her head toward the little girl outside.

Vesta pointed toward a rack to the left. “We got a lot of clothing for the little ones. Kids grow so fast they don’t have time to wear it out.”

The woman nodded, her eyes already scouring the racks. Vesta left her to it. The little boy, gripping his mother's hip like a monkey, darted inquisitive eyes at Vesta, inviting her to flirt with him. Vesta smiled tightly but made no effort to engage with him. Instead, she straightened clothing on the rack nearest the open door, but it was just an excuse to watch the little girl. She would never have let her three-year-old out of her sight, especially to play with a strange dog, but the mother didn't seem worried. Vesta kept one eye on the little girl, Lupita, as she rearranged the already-neat clothing.

The woman piled shirts and pants on the counter as she found things to her liking, and Vesta was glad to see someone get some use out of them. Within fifteen minutes, there was an impressive collection stacked high, and Vesta had to abandon her post at the door to fold the clothes and place them in the donated grocery bags kept under the counter. Lupita suddenly barreled into the room as Vesta put the last of the clothing into a bag. She spoke excitedly in Spanish, and her mother listened with half an ear, stroking the little boy's head lolling on her shoulder; he was very nearly asleep. Vesta hated to interrupt, but she wasn't going to let the opportunity go by.

"Before you go, I'd like to read you something from the Bible." She didn't mean to sound prim, but she wanted to give the words the importance they

deserved. The mother nodded with a smile, not at all uncomfortable, and Vesta quickly found the book of Matthew. "It's the Lord's Prayer," she explained. "It's how Jesus says we should pray. It goes, 'Our Father which art in Heaven—'"

"Hallowed be Thy Name!" The little girl interjected enthusiastically, clapping her hands. Her mother smiled indulgently and tugged Lupita's ponytail.

"Lupita knows this one," she explained.

The little girl took that as an invitation, and she stood very straight and recited in a sing-song voice: "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on *Earth* as it is in *Heaven*. Give us this day our daily *bread*, and forgive us our passes, as we give those who have passed against us. Lead us not into the temple but deliver us from *evil*. For Thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory forever. *Amen*." She stressed her words just like Becky, and except for the mistakes, Vesta had to admit, had done an impressive job. Before she could compliment her, however, they were interrupted by a wildly exuberant brown and white blur.

Samson, somehow free, raced around the table in the middle of the room and then back out the door. Both women and the little girl gasped at the escape

artist, and the commotion woke the little boy, who began to fret, fisting his eyes irritably.

The mother threw a chastening Spanish tirade at the little girl, clearly blaming her for Sam's escape. Lupita just as clearly defended her innocence and worked up a set of affronted tears. For an instant, Vesta merely felt relief, that the little dog might be gone for good, and with it the responsibility of caring for it. But immediately, her sense of duty returned, and the image of Becky's face if she told her Sam had run away. She sighed and walked outside, looking for him in the churchyard, but he was already down the road—she could see him pausing to sniff an interesting bush. She irritably called his name, and he glanced up but didn't return to her, his leash trailing on the ground, his obedience training forgotten. It wouldn't be hard to catch him, she thought, just an annoyance.

But the mother followed her out the door and apologized over and over for what she assumed was her child's doing. When she spotted the dog, she abruptly dumped her little boy into Vesta's surprised arms. "I go get him!"

Vesta, astonished to be holding a baby, was just as shocked at the woman's words. "No, no," she faltered. "That's okay. He'll come back on his own, I'm sure." But the woman was already hurrying away from the church. "You don't

have to do that!” yelled Vesta after her retreating back. The woman waved an arm behind her and yelled in return, “You do for me; I do for you.” She ran down the road, but when Sam saw her coming, he gave a yip and took off around the corner. Instead of coming back to the church, the woman ran off after him.

Vesta was aware of the absurdity of the situation she now found herself in. The little boy stared at her distrustfully, tears forming in his eyes as this strange woman awkwardly held him. Lupita stood off at a distance, pouting because of the scolding, and defensive in case the old woman blamed her, too. Vesta didn’t know what she was supposed to do with the two children abandoned in her care. The sun shone down directly overhead, and sweat broke out on her scalp. Before the little boy could give in to tears, she stiffened her spine, tightened one arm around his body, and reached out a hand to the little girl.

“Come inside, Lupita. It’s too hot to stand around out here.” Lupita eyed the hand warily, but took it, and Vesta breathed a sigh of relief. She led the children into the Closet, and she pointed to a chair in the corner. “You can sit there while you wait for your mother to come back.” The little girl obligingly sat down. “She shouldn’t be too long. Sam couldn’t have gone very far.”

“It wasn’t my fault!” Lupita crossed her arms belligerently, chin thrust up, ready for an attack.

“I know. He gets away sometimes. Dogs do that. Your mother will find him and bring him back.” Lupita was surprised at Vesta’s forgiveness, and frankly, Vesta was surprised herself. She hid her confusion by gently rubbing the little boy’s back, trying to soothe his suspicions. “What’s your brother’s name?”

“Gabriel. I’m hungry.”

Vesta spoke softly to the baby. “It’s okay, Gabriel, sweet one. It won’t be long now.” She began an easy, instinctive sway, and she held him a little closer to her shoulder, tempting him to lay his head against her neck. He squirmed for a moment before reluctantly settling against her collar. After only a few breaths, he was deeply asleep, and Vesta was left with the forgotten pleasure of his slight weight against her chest, something she hadn’t experienced since Becky was a baby.

She turned her attention to Lupita, who was pulling at her sandal straps. “I was very impressed that you knew the Lord’s Prayer, Lupita,” she praised. “That’s really something from a little girl who doesn’t even go to school yet.”

“I *go* to school.”

“Oh?” Vesta was surprised and checked the clock. It wasn’t even one yet.

“Did you miss school today?”

“I *went* to school today.”

“But it’s still early. Why aren’t you in school now?”

“It’s *morning* school.”

Vesta dragged up memories from the past, finally remembering. “You mean preschool.”

“Yeah. I’m hungry.”

“Well, you are very smart to have learned your Bible for someone so little.” She ignored the second comment. “How old are you? Three?”

“I’m *four*.” And obviously offended. “I’m *hungry*.”

“Well, your mother will be back any minute...” Lupita’s eyes met hers and Vesta felt a small guilt but didn’t know why. “I don’t really have any food here. It’s a church, and we don’t keep food...” She trailed off as she remembered the Charity Pantry in the room next to the Closet. It was open one day a week, same as the Closet, though Vesta had never volunteered there. But her key would open its door, same as this room. “Come with me,” she said with determination, “and we’ll see what we can find.” She and Lupita went to the hallway and Vesta used her key to let them into the Pantry.

The Pantry was exactly as it sounded, shelves stacked with food that was free to anyone who needed it. Well, a hungry four-year-old was clearly in need, Vesta reasoned, and she searched the shelves. But as she looked, she grew disappointed. Everything was canned, and none of it very appealing. Yellow corn, creamed corn, sweet corn, okra, green beans, kidney beans, pinto beans, shelf-stable milk, boxes of mac and cheese—none of it very tempting at the moment, and all of it requiring a kitchen. Vesta wondered what homeless people did if they came to the Pantry—most of the food wasn't instant. And all of it was cheap. No name brands, no luxuries like cookies or pudding, not even very flavorful. Suddenly, with a small child beside her, Vesta thought the Pantry seemed very mean. She herself had donated canned items to this good cause, feeding the poor, but all at once she was embarrassed to offer any of it to Lupita.

“What can we eat?” Lupita asked with interest, fingering the cans of food. Vesta reached out a hand to the child.

“None of this,” she decided.

“But I'm hungry!”

"I know." She locked the door to the Pantry and took them back to the Closet, relieved that their mother hadn't returned yet. She reached under the counter and pulled out her own lunch. "Do you like peanut butter and jelly?"

"Yes."

"Then come sit down, and we'll share." Vesta maneuvered herself around the counter, with Gabriel still sleeping hard on her shoulder, and she brought a stool to sit beside Lupita's chair. Pulling out her sandwich, she offered half to Lupita, who took it without a word. She ate quietly, swinging her sandals against the chair cushion, reminding Vesta oddly of Sam in her neatness. Vesta ate her half cautiously, careful not to wake Gabriel, looking out the door for their mother. After Lupita finished her half so quickly, Vesta pulled out a bag of carrot sticks and handed three to the child. Even Becky, who had been a compliant child, had resisted eating vegetables, but Lupita ate them enthusiastically and without complaint.

The only thing left in Vesta's lunch bag was a plastic-wrapped package of twin chocolate cakes. Vesta had a sweet tooth, and she looked forward to her daily treat. She considered not pulling the package out of the bag; Lupita would never know what she missed, and children didn't need the sugar anyway. Besides, Vesta had already shared so much. It was fine to keep her treat to

herself, she told herself defiantly, but found she couldn't look the little girl in the eye.

"Here." She opened the cellophane wrapper. "Do you like chocolate?" Lupita grinned and nodded, and Vesta handed one cake over with a stiff smile.

"I got him!" Lupita's mother stood suddenly in the doorframe of the room, Samson tucked in her arms, looking a little dirty, but very pleased with himself. The woman laughed. "I chase him all over the neighborhood, but I get him."

Vesta set her lunch bag down beside the chair and stood up. The woman handed Vesta his leash and released the dog; he trotted eagerly to Lupita, who petted his back with one hand while clutching her cake in the other. Vesta passed Gabriel's limp form to his mother, momentarily missing his warm weight against her. "I appreciate you going after him; I couldn't have chased him like you did."

The woman shrugged and laughed. "Good exercise." She walked to the counter to gather the clothing bags that had been forgotten in the commotion. Vesta, the leash's loop in her hand, turned back to Lupita, and found her feeding the precious snack cake to Sam, who licked her fingers in gratitude.

"You shouldn't do that!" Vesta fussed. "Chocolate isn't good for him."

Lupita looked up in surprise. "But Samson likes it."

Vesta tried to explain. "He's a dog. He doesn't *need* it."

The little girl shrugged at the reasoning and patted his head. "That's okay," she said in a sure voice. "Sometimes we need things we don't need."

"Time to go, cielito," her mother said, and Lupita jumped up from the floor. Sam watched her longingly but once again on the leash, he was an obedient dog and sat still. Lupita's mother had the bags in her free arm and Gabriel in her other, and with a smile and a wave to Vesta, she stepped outside. "Wait," Vesta said to Lupita, who dutifully followed her mother. She reached into her lunch bag and pulled out the extra snack cake, saved for herself. She handed it to the little girl, who smiled but didn't say thank you, too busy eating it to acknowledge it. She ran after her mother.

Vesta was left alone in the Closet with the dog, who must be very tired from his adventure around the neighborhood. She stepped outside and tied him again to the post, securing the knot with extra firmness, and spent the rest of her shift straightening clothes. No other customers came to the Closet, and she locked the door at 2. Untying the little dog's leash, the pair walked home, but Vesta didn't feel her usual sense of satisfaction upon doing her Christian duty. She felt sort of hollow instead, and almost ashamed, though she didn't

for the life of her know why. She was even relieved that Lonnie wasn't there to see her. He always knew when something was wrong, and if he'd asked her, she wouldn't know what to say. When they entered the kitchen, the dog headed toward the laundry room, just like he'd been trained. Vesta watched him disappear, and after a moment, she reached under the sink cabinet, searching for the basket of things Becky had brought with the dog. Finding a squeaky ball, she squeezed it, and the dog shot back around the corner, confused but curious at the lively sound.

"Come on, Samson," she said. "Let's play."

Penny Milam was born and raised in the Appalachian Mountains and has taught high school English for many years. She lives in East Tennessee with her husband and three children in an old farmhouse boasting the distinctive history of having a Civil War soldier shot on the front porch. She won't tell which side he fought for. Her work has appeared in *Still: the Journal and Deep South Magazine*.